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Holiday Food Safety

Keep Food Hot—Cold—Clean

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Those grand holidays — such as Easter, Thanksgiving, and New Year's — are occasions for delicious feasts...not upset stomachs. Food safety requires special attention at holiday times because you are usually handling large amounts of food, preparing it in a busy kitchen, and serving the meal buffet style. All these contribute to the possibility of food poisoning.

Q What precautions should be taken for a holiday buffet?


A Buffets are festive and fun but they require extra care in preparing, storing, and serving food. Consider how many guests you can safely serve. Be sure you have enough refrigerator space for the perishable foods. Keep buffet servings small, and replenish the serving dishes as needed, directly from the refrigerator or stove. When all your guests have finished eating, put the perishables — especially the meat and poultry — back into the refrigerator. Remember, when foods are left on the buffet table for more than 2 hours, the risk of food poisoning increases.

Q How can I tell if food is safe to eat?

A Unfortunately, you can't always tell. Germs that cause food poisoning seldom change the taste, odor, or looks of food. If you know a perishable food has been left out more than 2 hours or handled carelessly, throw it out. To be sure they are safe to eat, keep meat and poultry dishes COLD (below 40°F or 4°C) or keep them HOT (above 140°F or 60°C) until serving time.

Q What foods should be given special attention?

A Each year, many cases of food poisoning are reported from holiday dishes such as cold meats, poultry stuffing, potato salad, meat salads, cream pies, and eggnog. All



of these contain meat, poultry, or eggs... just what germs love. Also, these foods are handled more than other foods in preparation — especially for a fancy buffet — and it's easy for germs to spread from hands to the food. Keep your hands and utensils clean when preparing food. If you prepare dishes ahead of time, refrigerate them immediately until serving.

Q What precautions should I take in stuffing a turkey?

A It's best to stuff the bird just before roasting it. Stuff it loosely to allow heat to penetrate the stuffing. Use a meat thermometer to make sure the interior of the stuffing reaches a minimum temperature of 165°F (74°C). Remove all stuffing after cooking.

For absolute safety, bake the stuffing separately from the bird. Germs love the ingredients in stuffing, and the warm, moist inside of a turkey is a perfect place for germs to grow. The thick meat on the turkey protects the germs from extreme heat or cold; so they continue to grow to dangerous numbers. Also, the stuffing gets a lot of handling in preparation, and it's easy for germs to get inside the turkey.

Refrigerate leftover stuffing and turkey in separate containers.

Q Once the holiday meat has been thoroughly cooked, is there any danger of food poisoning.

A Very much so. Even though most germs are killed when you boil, broil, or roast foods, germs can multiply again after the food has cooled. Further, germs from raw

meat and poultry can spread to cooked food if the two come into contact. Germs also can spread, during handling, to foods not normally cooked. So handle cooked food carefully, keep it hot until served, and refrigerate leftovers promptly.

Q What about eggs?

A They should be purchased from refrigerated display cases. Only fresh, clean unbroken eggs should be used any time the eggs are not going to be thoroughly cooked—for example, for use in uncooked salad dressings, ice cream, and eggnog.

It's fun to color eggs at Easter. While hardcooked eggs are not as perishable as raw ones, they can carry food-poisoning germs. The eggs used in egg rolling and egg hunts should be put into the refrigerator right after the festivities. Children should be cautioned not to eat the pretty eggs they have carried around for hours in their Easter baskets.

Q How can I prevent the spread of germs?

A You can prevent spreading germs by washing your hands and kitchen utensils with soap and hot water after handling one food and before moving on to another. The same goes for the cutting board you use for raw meat. Wash it thoroughly before using it for cooked meat or you'll get germs right back on the cooked food.







Q What if I want to prepare holiday dishes ahead of time?

A When preparing a hot dish ahead, place it in the refrigerator within 30 minutes after cooking. Reheat thoroughly just before serving.

Never leave cold dishes containing meat, poultry, or eggs at room temperature. Refrigerate immediately after preparation.

Q Is it safe to purchase groceries in advance for the holiday?

A Yes, with proper handling. Pick up meat, poultry, and dairy products last at the supermarket. Have perishables bagged together to keep them cool, and go directly home to refrigerate them. Use fresh meat, poultry, eggs, and liquid dairy products within 3 to 5 days of purchase. Freeze fresh meat and poultry immediately after purchase if you plan to keep them longer.

Q Is it safe to thaw meat and poultry at room temperature?

A The best way to thaw meat and poultry is in the refrigerator. A turkey may be thawed at room temperature in a tightly closed double paper bag. Double bags provide insulation and allow even thawing to occur. Meat and poultry may be thawed in watertight wrapping under cold water. Change the water frequently to keep it cold. Cook meat and poultry promptly after thawing.



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Foodborne illness, vomiting, stomach
unpleasant symptoms which can last for
several hours or even days! Use these
three simple rules for food safety: Keep
Food Hot, Keep Food Cold, and Keep
Food Clean.

Other Food Safety Publications (English and Spanish)

- Food Safety for the Family.
FSQS-33
- Summertime Food Safety. FSIS-4
- Safe Brown Bag Lunches. FSQS-37
- How to Fight the Food Spoilers.
(mini-poster). PA-1255

For a free copy, write to: FSIS
Information, U.S. Department of
Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

United States Department of Agriculture
Food Safety and Inspection Service

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FSIS-8
(formerly FSQS-48)

